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ALSO, WHY NOT SAY "YES"?

BY RICHARD T. HOLBROOK

ONE evening years ago a group of travelers, of whom I happened to be one, were discussing languages in the smoking-room of a transatlantic liner. Nearly every one had told some relevant anecdote, or had risked some philological observation, when a Genoese gentleman remarked that one difference he had noticed between the English language and the American language was that, whereas the English say "yes," the Americans say "ya." What astonishment this aroused, if any, and what comments were made, I have forgotten; but the remark itself has stuck to my memory for more than fifteen years and may have led me, during that period, to make a good many careful observations, as well as to develop numerous reflections which seem to me worth recording.

It is curious that the word by which the members of a given nation most commonly *affirm* should so long, so often, and so strongly have impressed even casual observers *not* of that nation. "*J'avé eu bôcoup d'aventures*, oh! yes," says Sir John Rowell, in Maupassant's *La Main*, and in another of his stories, if I remember aright, a band of English tourists repeat their "aoh yes" in chorus, "*tout en mangeant des sandwiches*." If the lively inhabitants of the Latin Quarter have no more extensive acquaintance with our mother tongue, there are few of them whose vocabulary lacks *plum-pouddingue*, *my darleeng*, *goddem*, and *aoh yes*, and the strange Britons who disport themselves in French farces say "aoh yes" every few seconds, but they say "yes"! Six centuries ago, Dante declared that although the ancient idiom of the "Slavonians, Hungarians, Teutons, Saxons, English, and many other nations" . . . had been "drawn off into various vulgar [that is, living] tongues," this alone remained "to almost all of them as a sign of

their common origin, that almost all of the above-named answer in affirmation, *jo*," that is, *yo*. Long before his time France had been divided politically as well as linguistically into two great parts called [*le pays de*] *Languedoc* and *Languedoil*, or *Oc*-land and *Oil*-land, because in the South men said *oc* for "yes" and in the North *oil*, now *oui*. For reasons best known to him, the troubadour Bertran de Born dubbed his friend King Richard Lion-heart "*Richard oc e no*" and His Majesty is still called "Richard Yea and Nay." For Dante, Italy is the "fair land where *sì* is heard"—the *bel paese là dove il sì suona*—and in that pit of Hell where he encounters political thieves, one of the devils cries that at Lucca every one's a cheat, except Bon-turo; "there, for money of No they make Aye"—"*Del no, per li denar, vi si fa ita*"—*ita* being the Lucca form for *sì*, or "yes." So *ita* appears to be included in his scorn!

Now, it is possible, of course, to express affirmation, agreement, or affirmative denial in many ways—for example, by a wink, a smile, a squeeze of the hand, by nodding the head instead of wagging it; but for audible speech most languages possess one or two words, seldom more, by which men mean "yes" and nothing else. Such forms are the national means of affirmation; they are all that is needed in *viva voce* voting or to answer certain questions in courts of law. Every language known to me, save Latin, has some such brief expression, needing no other word to complete it. This expression is familiar to every native and, in the case of the great languages—*die Cultursprachen*—is generally familiar to foreigners as well. Every schoolboy knows that the German (or "Dutch"!) for "yes" is *ja*, and benighted indeed is he or she who has never heard of *oui*. To be sure, a good many Frenchmen occasionally vary the thing by pronouncing it *v'i* or *voui*, and Balzac makes his parvenu barber, César Birotteau, say, "*Ah ouiche! Césarine a bien mis un quatre au bout des Popinot*"; but most Frenchmen get along very well with just *oui*, or *si* in contradiction, though they love *nuances*, and are not in the habit of mangling this or other words.

In England the only common affirmative is "yes," used by high and low; English seamen and our own may still say "Aye, aye, sir," though "yes, sir" is the only form that I have heard, and "aye" or "oh aye" is frequent in the northern counties and in Scotland. "Aye" is never heard

in the United States, so far as I am aware, except in voting, but various other forms used here are common in English dialects. "Eece" (phonetically, *i:s*, riming with "peace"), a Yorkshire form, generally drawled, I have never heard, and "yis" belongs here only to Irish immigrants; but "ess," a North Devonshire word, is common among our New England villages and figures often in Miss Mary E. Wilkins's observant novels. *E:us* and *yus(s)*, both from English dialects, one hears sometimes. *Yas*, with a "flat" *a* (phonetically, *jæs* or *jæ:s*, if drawled), South Devonshire, is perhaps the commonest affirmative among the "pore whites" and "niggros" in many of our Southern States, and is occasionally employed there by persons of a certain education. A professor, now dead, lecturing one day to a class in law in a New England university, turned to a student from somewhere in Texas and said, "Mr. Pinney"—if that was his name—"Mr. Pinney, suppose A's eaves project so far as to throw their overflowing rainwater over on to B's property and thus ruin his garden; does that constitute a tort?" "Wal, yas, suh," responded the student, "I think it do." For various purely linguistic reasons, this answer created immense hilarity, in which the professor himself, a most courteous and self-controlled gentleman, was forced to join for a moment. Now, as a rule, we laugh only when we are more or less surprised, and the class was undoubtedly taken off its guard; the whole response, delivered with a reflective and softly rising drawl, was full of local color applied in the wrong place; but, in so far as the "yas, suh," is concerned, and possibly the "wal," it was not more dialectal, more provincial, more absurd, if you will, than hundreds of words and pronunciations habitually employed by thousands of New Englanders and others whom even the best models of speech at Harvard or Yale cannot wean, in four years of daily contact, from linguistic peculiarities equally remote from the speech of a Lowell, a Norton, or that of Piccadilly; for between these the difference is but small. "Yas-suh," or "yas, suh," contains "yas," and "yas" is not more "outlandish" than "eh.a," "eh.ah," "eh.aw," "yeh.a," and a dozen variants thereof used daily by millions of people of all ages and classes throughout New York State, New England, and elsewhere—in fact, north, east, west, and south. Presumably, nearly all those

mature collegians who laughed at Mr. Pinney habitually employed words, phrases, and pronunciations that would seem equally uncouth in Piccadilly, or possibly in those few native spheres whose long-favored residents have been comparatively so true to "standard English speech." Probably most of those students, like their predecessors and successors, pronounced the name of their country nearly or quite without its *i*, probably most of them called their native heath "Noo England," said "back of" for "behind," "off of" for "off," "loaned" for "lent," "t'-mara" for "to-morrow," "I gaht" for "I've got," "sumpn" for "something," "I will" or "will I" for "I shall" or "shall I," and generally substituted "yeh.a," "eh.a," "eh.up," or some other equally provincial form, for "yes." The recognition of the uncouth, as such, depends entirely upon how, when, and where one has happened to be brought up, and, after all, one can have a provincial manner without having a provincial mind, though he who has neither is blessed.

To return to "yes," this ancient compound is not quite obsolete even in the speech of our least educated classes, not even among those millions to whom the question of "good English" never occurs, who are hardly aware of "grammar" once they have "graduated," who speak naturally; but in all cases "yes" leads a precarious life and its place has been largely usurped by numerous other forms, all in daily use, though only one has yet found its way into any dictionary generally accessible, and though only a few are ever quoted.

In every-day speech the most frequent of our affirmatives is "yeh.a," so pronounced that its first syllable rimes with day and that the second is a mere murmured vowel, like the *a* of "idea." The majority of our population use this form "yeh.a" at least ten times as often as "yes." Though ignored by our dictionaries and seldom, if ever, employed by our "realistic" authors in their supposedly "realistic" dialogues, it is the chief American affirmative; it is habitually used by the young and the old, by the refined and the unrefined, by both sexes, by financiers and by professors (including professors of English), by fashionable society and by the "plain people." Being our main and universal affirmative, "yeh.a" is our *oc* or *oil* and the United States is *Yeh.a*-land, whereas England is *Yes*-

land. This "yeh.a" appears to be nearly identical in sound with the affirmative regularly employed by our linguistic ancestors in England a thousand and more years ago—namely, "yea," anciently spelled with a *g* (pronounced like initial *y*) and stressed on the *a*, though the stress was long ago shifted back so that the form became "yea" (that is, our present "yeh.a"), which in its turn became the stately "yea" which we pronounce to rime with "nay" and which we regularly find in the Bible or other linguistically archaic books. I once suggested to a fellow-philologist that "yeh.a," with the common variants "yeh.áh" and "yah," might perpetuate by an unbroken oral tradition the Anglo-Saxon "geá," but for reasons not given he forthwith scouted the hypothesis, assuming, I suppose, that "yeh.a" merely happened to resemble the ancient form and that it was due to a mangling of "yes," like "yep."

A German Doctor of Philosophy, who had come to the United States to teach in one of our higher colleges, soon dropped the "yes" he had learned in England and unconsciously adopted the "yeh.a" which he heard used by most of his American colleagues. One day he naturally employed this form in an interview with his president, a lover of pure speech, who said, "Dr. Blank, you must try to improve your English; 'yeh-a,' 'yah,' or whatever it was that you are using, is not English; you should try not to mix German words with English." "That's what I have heard since I've been here." "No, not among cultivated people." "Oh, I beg your pardon, that is the kind I learned it from." "No, cultivated people could never use such an expression; only persons of German parentage." This interlude led to no serious rupture and afforded some amusement to the German's American colleagues, most of whom continued to say "yeh.a," in jest and otherwise, precisely as they had always done.

Evidently, however, Americans do not accept "yeh.a" as their formal affirmative; for if they did, the following experiment would not almost invariably succeed. The next time some one gives you a "yeh.a" (some young lady at "Central," for instance), answer: "I beg pardon, what did you say?" She will be certain to reply, *not* "I said 'yeh.a,'" but "I said 'yes.'" In other words, "yeh.a" has not won social recognition, citizenship, so to speak, and when any one who habitually employs it in speech is made

conscious of his or her language, he or she will at once turn to "yes." "Yes," naturally, is the form found in letters or in almost all printed matter; for, as all philologists are aware, *patois* is almost never written by those who speak it: witness the Romanic languages, French, Spanish, Italian, which existed for centuries before any one went so far as to write down even a few words of them (the Strasburg oaths, in French, etc., A.D. 842).

In the United States, "yes" is pre-eminently a book word, though it is also scattered somewhat thinly through the conversations of every-day people and is employed habitually by a negligible number of individuals who are both highly cultured and careful of their speech. Furthermore, as compounds or set phrases tend to preserve old forms and old sounds, "yes" regularly occurs in all stock combinations. That is why persons whose habitual affirmative is ordinarily "yeh.a," or "eh.a," "eh.up," "yeh.up," never say "yeh.a, sir," "eh.a, to be sure," "yep, madam," "eh-up, indeed," or "eh.a, thanks," for example. For the same reason you will always hear, "Well, make up your mind; is it *yes* or *no*?" But, "Did she say 'yes'?" Reply, 'Eh.a,' but I guess she didn't mean it." Quite likely, she actually said "m'hm," "eh.a," "eh.ap," "yup," or something of that type, employed constantly in the environment where she happened to have been brought up.

Peruse the comic department of almost any magazine or newspaper and you will be pretty certain to find a dialogue in which somebody says "yep." This monosyllable is customarily put in the mouths of light-hearted tramps, of shop-girls, "bell-hops," atrophied male suburbanites, flippant children of low birth, the implication being that it is not employed by the *élite*; but if it is not, the *élite* must be a very rare breed, *rari nantes in gurgite vasto*, as the poet says, for not a day passes but one can hear persons who enjoy the opportunities of wealth, social prestige, and mayhap "a university education," use this very form with great frequency and without the slightest intention to be humorous or piquant. It is used, as a rule, quite unconsciously, and not by children only, but by serious adults who shun what they would call "slang" and would not like to be held cheap on any account.

"Yes, sir"—a group which in various States, but especially in New England, is occasionally employed as an em-

phatic exclamation (and without any humorous intent) in addressing girls or women!—"yes, sir," has several striking variants: first, "yes, *sir*," an accentuation as common and as illogical as that in "I hadn't any reason *to* go," or in "He's a married *man*." Then what is "yes, sir-*ee*"? Well, like "no sir-*ee*," it is as characteristically American as "yes, sirrah" is Elizabethan; but that final *ee* is mysterious—possibly a decayed remnant of *ye* or *thee*, possibly nothing but an emphasizing vocalic appendix, like the *o* which cheerful Britons often add to "right."

"Yessir" (popularly so written to indicate that the *s* is not doubled, and that the compound is pronounced rapidly), "yessir," like "nossir," is an expression ascribed by realistic authors to negroes and to other individuals not unduly elegant in their speech. "Yessum," an informal variant of "yes, m'm," which comes, of course, from "yes, m'am," is another strange compound which I once heard quite exceptionally addressed to myself—exceptionally, because my title is "sir" rather than "madam." A very small colored child, whom I happened to encounter one evening as he was issuing from my abode with a basket on his arm, said to me: "Is you Mistoo . . .?" "I am," said I; "have you left my wash?" "Yessum," he responded, in the deep, sweet tones of Africa, and started homeward to his mother, a courtesy-loving widow, as the reader may already have divined. What has become of her helpful offspring would be hard to say, but it is most unlikely that he has turned into a carouser or been lynched, for an habitual observance of merely verbal etiquette tends to sweeten manners and to exercise a soothing influence on persons born amid rude surroundings or barbarously inclined. Many little boys of the plainer sort would have said "yæ," a hideous expression ending with the "flat" *a*, a vowel which never ends a word in the English language; but "yæ" is extremely common, in both senses of that word. However, let us pass to other observations.

Under formal conditions, or amid stately and solemn surroundings, a person who would otherwise say "yep," "yap," "yahp," "ya," "yeh.up," "eh.up," "eh.yup," "eh.a," "eh.ah," "eh.ya," "eh.aw," etc., with hardly ever a "yes" to reveal a remnant of gentle breeding, will almost invariably adopt "yes"; in court, for example, or in taking a husband or wife. Certainly nobody who has attended

weddings has ever heard bride or groom reply with any affirmative but "yes," and even an uncultivated judge would be likely to reprove any one who should substitute a "yeh.a," a "yep," or some other such form, for the "yes," or "yes, your honor," with which even the most uncouth know enough to respond in court.

Such is the tenacity of tradition! But in our schools of all grades, not less perhaps than in less enlightened surroundings, all the forms thus far quoted, and many others, almost infinitely variegated by changes of vowels, of consonants, and of stress, by jerking and by drawling, by mumbling, chopping, or by the use now of one cripple, now of another, as if they were synonyms intended to convey various shades of meaning, though in reality no difference is either intended or understood—all these, let us note, are so common and have been with us so long that probably not one person in ten thousand has even had it occur to him that they exist; but they do exist, and their existence is not only easy to observe, but it is worth observing. For though this particular word, namely, "yes," is mauled more frequently and more variously than most of our linguistic heritage, the tendency to maul is due to a frame of mind and to an inadequacy of schooling which manifest themselves in many other phases of our national life. Our railways kill at least six times as many people per "passenger mile" as do those of, say, England, though the average and the highest speed of our trains are both less great; we allow at least eight times as many buildings to be burned, by accident and by arson, as any country in Europe; our criminally inclined may not be more numerous than there, but they are more active and safer by far; our slovens and our slatterns are free to scatter their rubbish as they please, so that even our most prosperous towns are usually cluttered with floating paper and other rubbish, dropped with impunity, inoffensive to the majority, and gathered up by fits and starts, or not until the streets look as if they were intended to serve as public dumping-grounds. If a large amount of concordant evidence is largely true, our average tendency is to care more and more for good order and artistic finish; possibly, then, we shall include speech in our programme of things requiring consideration. The time when Americans will have to thumb a dictionary in order to understand (or translate) Thackeray, Stevenson, or Kipling, and, incident-

ally, every American whose writings we now esteem, is still indefinitely remote; but, wherever our dialect is written or spoken, at its best it varies generally for the worse from the only recognized standards of good English speech. For every professor of English in England our colleges can show a score, but for every individual in our domains who closely conforms in speech and writing to any accepted standard the original home of all English can show a score; not only that, but a degree of correctness which in France, or Norway, or illiterate Spain, would be regarded as commonplace must here be considered exceptional; for, whatever may have been its condition when our dialect was nearer its source, it is now in such a state that those who use their voices correctly, who articulate clearly, and who are able to express their thoughts without frequent recourse to pointless slang, and who in other essentials comply gracefully, as if by nature, with the simplest requirements of standard English, in the broadest meaning of that term, can be invariably set down as persons of extraordinary culture. Since language is the main instrument for expressing thought, it is regrettable that we, as a nation, should be so inclined to impoverish and mar what, at its best, is one of the richest languages in the world, the only language in which at present not less than a hundred million people can converse without serious difficulties and in which millions of educated beings can converse with only a passing sensation of strangeness due to the differentiating influences of many climates and of isolation. As our English is destined to be the only world-language, the only natural medium by which other wholly foreign nations may at some not distant time find it convenient to exchange their ideas and their wares, we have one more good reason for wishing to possess an idiom which besides being thoroughly efficient shall also have conveyed many centuries of culture, rather than something which must be regarded as a parvenu. Whether the new standard of this great dialect is to be created mainly by those whose affirmative is "yes," or mainly by those who affirm otherwise and whose whole speech may be classified thereby, is therefore an important question, important not merely to the few who know something of the past, but, through their conveyance, to the many whose minds have no background other than some small fragment of the "present."

RICHARD T. HOLBROOK.